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S3:E4 – Psychological Safety – Dr Sam Mather

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[00:00:00] **Beth Stallwood:** Welcome to the Work Joy Jam podcast. I am your host, Beth Stallwood founder of Creative Work Joy. In this episode, I am joined by Dr. Sam Mather. And we talk all around this subject of psychological safety, which I don't know about you, but I'm seeing everywhere at the moment, lots of research going into this, including Sam's own research and thinking about how can we help people to be themselves, to be, and feel safe in their working environments, in a world of change where some of the things that we're used to hold us safe are no longer there. And with organizations changing its speed with transformation, with things like remote working, some things that we all need to consider and what Sam does in her research, and we talked through in this conversation is to look at both the impact of the leader and the team, but also what we, as individuals can bring to enhance our own levels of psychological safety.

I really enjoyed this conversation. I hope you do too. I'll pop on at the end to give you some of my takeaways here it is...

Welcome to the Work Joy Jam. So excited today to be joined by Dr. Sam Mather. And I have known some for many years now. And [00:02:00] Sam was actually the person who gave me my first ever job in learning and development. So I give them. Huge credits for taking a chance on me and for inspiring me to work in this world and a massive part of my story as to how I am here, doing everything, Work Joy now, but rather than me introduce properly, I'm going to hand over to you.

Tell us a little bit more about you, Sam, and how you got to where you are today.

[00:02:29] **Sam Mather:** Thank you, Beth. Thanks. Well, my background has been entirely in developing talent and as we all do, when we leave university, I kind of fell into it, but actually I started at the bottom as a, as a trainer, but progressed through the hierarchy if you like through using, in large organizations, across the world. So I've worked in Australia, I've worked in Africa, I've worked in America, and more recently in Europe, but with talent within organizations. So that what I'm doing is identifying, I've been designing and developing programs for, for talent, from high potential up to executive leadership programs, as well as the supporting mechanisms around that, so succession planning, competencies, frameworks and anything really that allows people to be the best that they can, and to support that I've done my own development. I'm a coach, I'm an applied neuroscientist, and a doctor in psychological safety. So, and that's what I continue to do is really support leaders to be the best leader they can. [00:04:00]

[00:04:01] **Beth Stallwood:** Amazing. It's a great, background and experience you have. And I think so many people who are listening will be really interested in all of those things. And I think where



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your research has been into and what you've written a lot about in your books and your thinking around it and the topic, and it's coming up everywhere I'm working at the moment.

I'm sure it is everywhere. You are this topic of psychological safety and. It's important, but also thinking about how do we actually use that practically. So it seems to me to be one of the things that lots of people are talking about, lots of people want, but maybe not that everyone really knows some of the things about how you go about getting it.

So what I'm wondering is, can you, I know this is going to be really hard because. You've written a massive thesis and books and everything about it. And I'm going to ask you to really simply explain it to me. And I asked you, can you, can you give us like the high level let's understand what this concept really is?

[00:05:01] **Sam Mather:** The context of psychological safety. So you're right. It is receiving increasing attention now, COVID having been a catalyst for many things, but one of the, the things that we've noticed is the key thing, which is differentiating a manager from a leader is a leader's ability to maintain individual performance in times of stress and crisis. And it's those leaders who are emotionally intelligent and are able to understand what the impact of the environment is on people and what was happening with it during COVID in particular is we were no longer feeling psychologically safe. So what does that mean? Well, it goes back to a [00:06:00] basic function of our brain and the brain is incredibly complex and I'm simplifying this, really just for convenience and understanding.

[00:06:13] **Beth Stallwood:** Please do so that my brain can understand it. So the us non applied neuroscientist can get it.

[00:06:19] **Sam Mather:** Okay. So, so we employ people because we, we employ them for the smart part of the brain that is able to make decisions, to solve complex problems, to be creative, to be innovative, to, to bring together diverse information. And that's why we employ them.

But there's also a part of our brain. Which I mean, it's commonly, now people have heard it as that, that, you know, in the, in books like the Chimp paradox and the limbic system, but there's a part of our brain that is purely designed to protect us as a species. And it's done really, really well. And therefore, because it ain't broke, hasn't changed in 20,000 years.

It's still looking for the looking out for the same threat to protect us against. And those are the threats that it's constantly scanning for. And there are five threats that we have wired into our brain and those five threats, every single one of them we're being stimulated by COVID every single threat that we are wired to look out for.



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We could see on a subconscious level and in doing so, right, it increases, your stress, hormones, and stress hormones, like adrenaline, and cortisol rise. The neuro transmitters, that fire, when you're doing smart [00:08:00] stuff like decision-making and, problem solving, they reduced. So it's like a Seesaw.

So the more stress and the more threats you perceive that you're, you're experiencing the less able your brain is to deal with, smart thinking. And we know this. Think about the last time you had a huge row with someone and you're in the throws of the round and it's all very emotive and it's only half an hour later when you go, oh, why didn't I say that?

[00:08:36] **Beth Stallwood:** Why didn't I say that? Or what did I mean when I was thinking, oh, why am I such an idiot?.

[00:08:41] **Sam Mather:** It's because you're, if you like. You're smart part of the brain is deprioritized because your brain is saying you're under threat. Your ability to do quadratic equations is irrelevant. Now all you need to be able to do now is yell, run away, fight whatever.

[00:08:58] **Beth Stallwood:** And that's the state that, you know, really interesting here that the COVID situation has put everybody into. Even if we haven't consciously kind of gone, this is what is happening.

[00:09:11] **Sam Mather:** I think, and I think this is what's brought psychological safety to the four. So the reason I, I was intrigued by psychological safety is it started from an organizational perspective, which was, which was pre COVID, in those days, BC, before COVID, Organizations are striving to become increasingly agile.

And they're having to, because of the fast moving environment, it's sometimes called VUCA - volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous. So they put mechanisms in place within the organization to allow them to do that things like boundary-less organizations and matrix structures and remote working and follow the sun and all these kinds of things.

But in doing [00:10:00] so they are, I noticed that there were unwittingly creating an unsafe environment. So already I think that there are organizations that are, in an attempt to keep up with the world, and wanting that the employees to be smarter, more innovative. They're actually not innate they're disabling, not if you like, and then layer COVID on top of that.

Where suddenly everything was even more uncertain and more volatile and the threat was even greater. You can kind of get why people finding it difficult to concentrate. They were finding it difficult to sleep. Sleep was a big problem for people being able to focus. All of those things are symptoms of, of, of feeling under threat.



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[00:10:55] **Beth Stallwood:** And you said a little while ago that there, I think it was five things. Can you tell us what those five things are?

[00:11:04] **Sam Mather:** So I call them the five Cs of comfort. So the brain is looking for comfort in the following areas. So the brain is automatically wired to see anything. The first one is consistency. So anything that is not consistent or is out of the ordinary, the brain will assume is a threat. So for example, it's Friday afternoon. Imagine your boss comes to you and says, can I speak to you at nine o'clock please Monday morning. What is your limbic system telling you.

[00:11:45] **Beth Stallwood:** Probably, oh, I've done something wrong. I'm gonna get fired. And I know that there's redundancies happening here. What if I possibly done wrong? And it's going to do that to me the entire weekend..

[00:11:56] **Sam Mather:** So, and it could be totally innocuous, but because that's [00:12:00] out of the ordinary, our brains will assume it's a threat and that's a safe thing to do. If you don't know what it is, assume it's a threat. Yeah, the other one is the other C is competency.

So at any point where we feel our competency is under threat, then we will have an emotional response to that. And the classic is getting feedback. You know, we learn to manage it. But actually there's still an emotional response to feedback and that is because the brain is going, you know, if you're, if you're not competent, then that could be a threat.

And if you take it back to sort of like our cave times, if you couldn't hunt or gather, then you you're in trouble. Yeah. So consistency, competency, control as the other one. So we, we love to be in control and at any point where we don't feel that we're in control, that will be perceived as a threat. Okay.

The other one is, the fourth one is cause so, and it based on the assumption that we have a finite amount of energy and resources, right. Why am I investing my resources in this? I need to know why, why am I doing that? You know, it takes a lot to, to, to, fuel this brain and fuel this body. If I don't understand why I'm doing something, then that could potentially be a threat.

Okay. And the final one is connectedness. So, we are, we are, herd animals, and we need to feel connected to other people, whether it's a team, whether it's in the family, whether it's the social social group, so they're the five CS. And if you think about COVID. It kind of hit all of them. Yeah.

[00:14:00] I mean, I don't know about you Beth, but I've been in this room alone.

I live alone with a cat. And so essentially, I, my connectedness was, was a struggle. My competence was a struggle because now I'm being asked to, to, to deliver a lecture via something called zoom. Which at the time put, put nothing but fear in me. I didn't feel I had any control because I wasn't able to control when I could go out where I could go.



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I could see what I could do. There was no consistency when wearing masks, when not wearing masks, we're wearing masks on a Tuesday when the moon is high. So it was very inconsistent and the cause initially that I was okay with the cause I could see the bigger picture, but that kind of dwindled after a while.

So all of those are being hit and therefore, whether we know it or not, our brain is saying right now, You're living in an environment of threat. The cortisol is high, stress is high you'll eventually your resilience will start drop struggled with your mental wellbeing, and, and then your boss comes along and then pals a whole lot of more stuff on you.

[00:15:10] **Beth Stallwood:** And one of the things I was really interested when you're talking through it. The other thing that really came to mind, tears in organizations right now change well, even before COVID, but in the last 10 years change is the constant thing that happens. So I imagine every time there's any kind of change program, I can see the same thing happening again, all five of those getting hit, like the, cause the reason why I'm doing my job has changed and competency. I'm being asked to do something I've not done before because my job has changed. And so every time. That kind of cycle happens. We need to be aware that this is what's happening in people's brains, right?

[00:15:41] **Sam Mather:** Yes, exactly. And time and time again, I see people present me with a change plan and I go, this is not a change plan. This is a project plan. This is a list of tasks that need to be done. So by the end of the month, we will, we will have, we will gain the buy-in. No, no, absolutely not. I think the [00:16:00] process of change is around understanding people and bringing them with you. And yes, that may mean it's slower, but recognizing that the responses that people have are hardwired. Now, I'm not saying we're victims to our limbic system. We can absolutely manage them, but the first stage managing them as being aware of them and knowing how, how, how to, respond.

I mean, communications are classic in organizations. Organizational communication. We've decided we're doing some change because we are now maximizing our efficiencies. Well, how do most brains interpret that?

[00:16:44] **Beth Stallwood:** They are getting rid of people?

[00:16:50] **Sam Mather:** Yes exactly. So, how, how it's communicated, and, you know, change is not an IT program. Or an IT implementation or, or a project plan that is not changed. That's a thing we have to do change is about managing people state from one state to another, in a way that keeps their smart brain online and the limbic system a little bit quieter than it would be normally.

[00:17:20] **Beth Stallwood:** Yeah. So we can't necessarily get rid of it completely. It's reactions are going to be there. I'm really interested now if we're okay to dive into it a little bit around, so this is a



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situation that many people will feel. I can totally relate to it. I imagine that our listeners there are going, yes, I know exactly what this feels like, and I don't like it.

And I wonder if we could approach this from two angles and maybe think about, so as an individual, if you're put in that position, which you will be, because those people have been in there at some point, if not many times, what can we do to help our limbic systems. And then also, maybe from the other angle is if you are leading change, which so many people are, how can we be [00:18:00] aware as leaders and be cognizant and able to do something with this information?

[00:18:07] **Sam Mather:** Well, th I mean, this is, this is really, it's a good question. That, so there are firstly, there are things you can do about it. You will never get rid of it nor do you want to, because it keeps you alive. If I said to you. You can, you can remove all fear in your life and I would get rid of all fear. I think I would be dead within a month.

[00:18:29] **Beth Stallwood:** Okay. Cliff edge lets jump.

[00:18:31] **Sam Mather:** Yes. Ooh, Ooh, look, look, let's jump off this bridge on it, on a stringy piece of elastic. So no, we need fear. Fear is all fear. Is, is your brain saying to all, any emotion is, is a message from the brain. this is an approach or this is a potential avoid that's all your brain is telling you. Yeah, so psychological safety up until my research had primarily been researched as a group construct, something that is a result of leaders and teams, I had been mulling on that thinking, well, this is great, but first of all, the things that used to create psychological safety as I've alluded to, are no longer present. So we don't go at the same time to the same desk, with the same team in the same building, with the same leader, and all these little mechanisms that make you feel safe, they don't exist anymore. You go in, you'd don't know which desk you are sat at even if you have a desk, your team might be all over the world.

All of those things that they're not there anymore. So how do we gain our psychological safety? And do I actually want to outsource my own psychological safety to an organization or somebody else. So [00:20:00] I researched it from the perspective of, is there a role of the individual in creating and maintaining their own psychological safety?

And this is why the, the two books I wrote, they're like sister books. So the findings were that yes, the leader and the organization are still the primary source of psychological safety, just over 60% of psychological safety is as a result of external factors, your leader, your team, reward and recognition policies, the organization standard stuff we know about, but that leaves 40% that's actually in your own hands. And even if you think about it, even if you were a leader, who'd created the Nirvana of organizations where it was the most perfect organization, would that guarantee that people would feel psychologically safe? No,



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[00:21:01] **Beth Stallwood:** Yeah. I was just thinking there, even if they could create 100% of their, but if that's 60%, you still haven't got the whole picture have you?

[00:21:13] **Sam Mather:** absolutely. So the answer is, I mean, the purpose of me then taking the books, which is essentially, my, my research taken from academic speak into our speak, the human language and to human life. Yes. And made much more entertaining than the academic, is the, the book for the leaders is how do we create an environment in which employees feel safe enough to engage the smart part of their brain and keep the limbic part of the brain that the threat response tempered. And I'm not saying it will go away because it never will, but to, to reduce it. [00:22:00] And I talk about leaders creating a safe environment, I say SAFE so it's about story and communication and creating purpose and meaning and connecting with people at the emotional level.

It's about. I mean, we hear a lot about boundary-less organization, about creating an arena, the As for arena. So the irony is if you want people to be innovative and creative and think out of the box and come up with new ideas and solve problems in different ways, you actually need to provide a boundary.

So, and I described this by going, so Beth, imagine if I put a scaffolders plank on the floor, and I said to you, I bet you, your favorite tippie, like you can't walk over that plank, would you do it

and not take said plank? And I put it on the ruse of two, 10 story buildings and say, okay, Beth, now, can you walk.

[00:23:05] **Beth Stallwood:** Yeah. I mean, I would think about it. I wouldn't immediately say no because I do like a challenge then I think I'd go. You don't have very good balance. This is not a very good idea.

[00:23:18] **Sam Mather:** So the ironic thing is, you know, you can do it cause you've done it on the floor, but there's additional risks.

So, assume that plank is now you're in this, metaphor for this crazy organization. You could probably cross that plank, but you'd be absolutely focused on where you're putting your feet and getting from one site to another and being very stressed about it. If I wanted to make that journey easier for you, I might put some scaffolding up.

I might put a rope there, maybe a net underneath. And, you know, you've not only walked the plank there, but you'll be able to stop and admire the view and, and your, your, your limbic system would be quiet. So it's about [00:24:00] creating an arena in which our employees feel safe in which to work. And I'm not talking a physical arena.



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I'm talking about, things like, and I know it sounds crazy, but being very clear about what the role is and where it starts to ends. Who receives, the output of your work? Where does it go? Boundaryless is another word for having no scaffolding on that plank.

[00:24:28] **Beth Stallwood:** Yeah. And actually, and many years of working with people, one of the things that stops talent, being able to kind of really be brilliant at what they do is not understanding what they're supposed to be doing, having unclear objectives. You know, what you're talking about here is like the basics of really good leadership. Isn't it? It's like, actually let's get some structure here, not so much that it's overwhelming, but enough that people are able to take all of their smart brain stuff and do something with it in a positive way.

[00:25:05] **Sam Mather:** And for me, smart is only half the story. So SMART goals appear to appeal to that. But yeah, if you want people to do something, you, you need to appeal to the heart, to the emotions because they are far more powerful than the head. If I said, oh, here am I with an optimistic view, looking that I'm going on a holiday, hopefully in September. And, and I'm thinking, well, I should probably think about losing five Ks if I'm going to get into that bikini. So I'm going to set myself a smart goal, five Ks specific, measurable, attainable, realistic time-bound tick. I can tell you right now that I suspect that I'll be lying on that beach.

And from, you know, there may well be very little difference. However, if somebody said let's get married in September and have a big [00:26:00] white wedding and a big frock, would I lose that weight? Right. I would probably lose 10 K

[00:26:10] **Beth Stallwood:** Because there's a more emotional, bigger connection to the outcome.

[00:26:14] **Sam Mather:** It's appeared to my emotion.

So the books talk about setting goals that are not just smart, which are important. But setting goals that are meaningful, that connect with people's identity, with connect, who they are, connect with their cause and their purpose and, and, and really the emotional connection, because that is what motivates people. Not, it's not the commission that motivates people. It's what they're going to do with that. Yeah, go on a holiday, take the kids away. That's the motivator, not the money.

[00:26:51] **Beth Stallwood:** And I think here, this is also where it kind of really deeply links in to my theory of work joy is that if you actually really get the purpose and you kind of really connect with it, it's so much easier to find the joy in the hard work.

[00:27:04] **Sam Mather:** Absolutely, absolutely. So, so that's the arena, the A piece, then the f is flourish. So I talk a lot about growth mindset. and enabling people to grow, and seeing how we need to invest in people's growth, whatever that means for them. And the final one, which is toughest one to swallow actually is, ego, light leadership.



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[00:27:36] **Beth Stallwood:** I like that term.

[00:27:36] **Sam Mather:** So create an ego light ethos within the organization. So the challenge we have is the five CS that we, I talked about earlier. We all have them, we all have our fears and it's absolutely natural, but we've been often brought up to, to hide those fears. [00:28:00] And I've described a model whereby what we do is whenever we feel that any of those fears are about to be, so we're going to be attacked from a competence base, or we feel that we're losing control the way we respond is we deploy our ego army. So we've built up an army around these and the army has been trained on how to respond. So I was brought up in a very shouty family, and I learned that when I get shouted out or told that I'm stupid or I've done something wrong as a child. I learnt, I taught my ego army to shout back. Yeah. Okay. So someone shouts at me or has a go at me? I shout. I had to retrain this army that was protecting me to go, Hey, army, you need to be a little bit less locked and loaded and more go on reconnaissance.

[00:28:59] **Beth Stallwood:** Find out more.

[00:29:01] **Sam Mather:** Yeah and, because with, you've got a really strong army, all that does is make people feel really unsafe because, you know, if it's about your ego and you being control as a leader and you being seen to be the one who's got all the competence and knows that all, then all that does is actually create a lack of safety in others.

[00:29:33] **Beth Stallwood:** Yeah. And we've probably all got different reactions, haven't we with our army. So some people might retreat. Yes. Some people. Yeah. So many different ways of reacting.

[00:29:45] **Sam Mather:** The army either attacks. It does stand down on sometimes it, diverts. So it can, and it works both ways. Actually. It can divert a compliment. [00:30:00]

So someone throws a compliment into you people go, no, no, no. It was nothing, honestly, it wasn't anything, you know, the arrow that's coming in, that's a compliment arrow the army snapped it in half before it's even got to you, you know, as well as the other way, round where if you've received a criticism. So imagine that as an arrow coming in as a form of criticism, the army in order to protect you have tagged a little tag on that arrow, which there's, don't worry the guy doesn't always talking about anyway, or he's an idiot. What would he know? So it's a very, very proficient army that we have built up over time and it creates and the common word for it is ego.

Yeah. So we need an ego light ethos in order to help create safety.

[00:30:55] **Beth Stallwood:** I love all those four things. I think it's a really lovely, easy way of thinking about it to consider all of those different areas, as leaders, as people who are responsible for other humans and keeping them, in a world where they can feel safe and do their best work and be the best that they can be at work, especially thinking about, and that development, we didn't go into too



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much detail about the flourishing, is one thing I often find is that we forget in organizations that it's about the individual's development and, you know, we have programs to train you to do the stuff that we want you to be able to do. And sometimes we lose the fact that hang on a minute, you're an individual human being and you might want development that isn't the same as what we think you should want.

And how do we really connect with that and, and support and enable people to grow in the way that's right for them.

[00:31:45] **Sam Mather:** And there is research to show that any development on anything can be beneficial holistically. So if, there was a, an organization that allowed people to do any [00:32:00] development they wanted.

If you want to learn to bake cakes, have an evening. We'll pay for that course because you're learning skills. And problem solving. And, there are skills that you're learning, which are transferable and the, and the broader, and the more creative you are in your life and the more experiences you've had in your life, the more ability you have to become creative and approach things from a different way.

So all learning is beneficial. So, so from a leader's perspective, that's what they can do, but individuals also have a role to help them become what I call sound. So we've got safe and sound and the sound is first of all, starting with the really basic stuff. And I'm sorry but turns out our parents were right. We do need to sleep. We do need to eat our vegetables, all those kinds of things.

[00:32:57] **Beth Stallwood:** Who'd have thought that all of these parents will be right.

[00:33:00] **Sam Mather:** I know. So when I teach, teach the, the piece, the S for sound is sustainability. So, and I say, this is the boring part. I talk a little bit about the brain and how the brain operates at different brainwaves. And if I have five different brainwaves and it's like, if you've got the gym, you don't just work one piece of your body, because what would happen is you'd end up with a very fit part of the body and the rest would be out of balance. And it's a bit the same with the brain. We have, we operate a five different frequencies and each of them have a role to play and it's really important that we connect with each of these frequencies, really just to keep the brain holistically fit if you like. So there is the alpha frequency, for example, is what I call sloth mode. So you're conscious and you're doing something, [00:34:00] but it's not taken a lot of effort. So I think of it like watching coronation street or, or a movie or reading a book, not like a, a non-fiction book, but an easy book to read. So you're doing stuff it's a bit vegging out that is as important as Beta, which is concentrating, learning, solving problems. But if you just did one of those things for the whole day, you'd be exhausted. If you just, you know, we've all known those days where we've done nothing all day, but slob out.



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And then at the end of the day, I don't know why I'm tired. I haven't done anything, but you're tired because you ha you just been working one part of the brain and we need to balance that. But then also if you're wanting to do more advanced techniques on managing the five CS, you need to make sure that your brain has all the resources it needs.

So, and it does go back to the boring stuff. So the neurons, the fuel that neurons use to fire, is wait for it, carbohydrates.

[00:35:11] **Beth Stallwood:** Bread is allowed in our lives.

[00:35:12] **Sam Mather:** I'm going to qualify that I'm saying that this is not a mandate to go and eat like loads of chips. I'm sorry. Not, not, not the base stuff. I'm talking more like the vegetables, the carbs you get from bread, vegetables, wholemeal carbs that the complex carbs that is the fuel for your brain. So we need cops and the good carbs. So we need carbs. We need to drink, obviously water, normal water, not sort of, you don't need any fancy water, exercise. I've got some colleagues at the University of Reading who are doing a lot of research around how exercise [00:36:00] helps rebuild the protective sheath of neurons and thereby preventing dementia and Alzheimer's, we're not quite sure how it works yet. We think it's to do with endorphins, but exercise is not just good for the heart. It's good for the head as well. and then the importance of. I'm switching off and the brain is actually very busy, doing very important stuff when we sleep. And if you don't get your eight hours, you may be very proud of the fact that you can, you can survive on five hours a night, but not for long, you won't.

Because there's work that the brain is doing to store memories, to help with learning, to, remove the toxin buildup that's happened because of all the neuronal firing during the day, all of those things are really important. So that is where you have to start by looking after...and it's really boring.

If you don't get the basics right. Doing the more advanced stuff on the sound model is going to be very, very difficult. And we know this because certainly I know when I have a food mood, tired, there is no rationality about me. And. I cannot manage my limbic system when you're ill or you're tired, or you're highly stressed.

It's much more difficult, but if your brain is in good nick, in a good place, then you can manage that.

[00:37:25] **Beth Stallwood:** Yeah. And it's really, it's, it's really interesting that you, this is the first one because it's probably not the answer that most people are expecting and say, how can we get psychologically safe? And you go eat your veggies, get some, sleep, drink some water, do some exercise.

[00:37:39] **Sam Mather:** Start with the basics. I mean, once you've got them in place, then you can start doing the more advanced stuff. So, purpose, having what's called an Omni purpose, an



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overriding purpose. Do you know what it is? And a lot of people think a lot of people attach their purpose to [00:38:00] things which are going to disappear eventually.

So I ask people what the purpose is and they give me their job title. No, that's not your life's purpose. Your job will contribute to your purpose. And although this is not popular, even your kids that only with you for a short period of time, they're going to leave home. And when they leave home, what is your purpose, then?

Your kids, your job, your hobbies. Your activities contribute to that. And if you can have an unwavering purpose, that is the constant horizon. It doesn't matter if your job changes. If your kids leave home, if you have to move house, if whatever happens, that horizon remains the same because it's your overriding purpose, mine is to support others, to learn and grow.

During COVID, there was a moment where I thought it was going to have to work in the supermarket, but that's okay as long as I'm helping others learn and grow as part of that, then at least I'm contributing to my purpose and it's not such a, a terrible thing to do, you know?

[00:39:11] **Beth Stallwood:** Yeah. And I love that it's bigger than all of these things that are moveable it's I imagine that if you can make that happen for yourself, it's massively grounding and helpful in, in times of need.

[00:39:23] **Sam Mather:** Yes, it absolutely does. It's not an easy process. I put some in the book, I put some tools and some little questionnaires and toolkits not to come up with the answer, but to start you thinking about it, because it's taken me a long time to realize, you know, why am I here? What is this all about? What, what, what is the common thread that drives me?

And, and I think once you, once you recognize that recognize that also helps make decisions. Making decisions a lot easier because it's like, how does this align with my purpose? Does it help me move forward [00:40:00] towards it or away from it? And again, it's just like that constant horizon that's steady and there the whole time that you head towards.

[00:40:10] **Beth Stallwood:** Yeah. Yeah, it's hard though. I totally get that. I work with a lot of people and finding that it's not an instant. I just know exactly what it is. There's some discovery to do isn't there.

[00:40:23] **Sam Mather:** There is. And, and you know that there are lots of tools out, you know, you can have a look at and some will work some and somewhat, but they're there, to, to start thinking about it.

So, so you've got your Omni purpose then, and having to establish that we need to then start making sure. That you have a useful narrative, that's the you and the end of end of the sound useful



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narrative. So there is all other respect relation. The re literature about this, it's generally thought or believe that we have a limited amount of cognitive resource in our heads.

We've got a limited amount of stuff that we can deal with at any one time. And we kind of instinctively know that, we've been there where it's like, if one more thing comes across my desk, I'm about to explode. So we have, if you imagine a finite amount there's a pie and, If we want our brains to operate productively, we need to make sure that the stuff going into it is stuff that keeps the limbic system quiet, thereby enabling our smart system, smart brain to operate.

So we have built up over time, a whole load of narratives about who we are, what we're capable of, what we're not capable of, but here's the thing. A lot of them were formed before we were like [00:42:00] 10. So we have the most neurons in our brain at the age of two. Wow. And from the age of two, those that don't get used, start to disappear and, you know, it's, it's a sad state of affairs that we're on the downhill from the edge of two, but beliefs and, and narratives are formed very, very young.

And unless we are quite self-aware and unless we've had, we are skilled at coaching and reflection and questioning ourselves, a lot of people just assume that's what it is. And I'll give you a great example, which, I remember standing, I was made to stand up in my math class at the age of 11. And I remember this teacher, like it was yesterday where he said in front of the entire class, you will never be any good at maths.

And then till about five years ago, I still believed that. Yeah. I, even though I have a business degree, I've done a masters. It came to a head the first time, the first year of my PhD, I went to a statistics course and went into utter meltdown because suddenly they've now started mixing letters and numbers and most of them were in Greek.

And I decided, so I remember going to my supervisor and going in a right state, going. I say, I can't do it. I can't do this PhD. I can't possibly do it. And she spoke, well, why not? Because I don't do math. She said, what makes you say that? I went because when I was 11, Mr. Ray, told me I couldn't do math. And she said, and how old are you now?

And I won't tell you how, what I said, but it certainly wasn't 11. And, and she said, what evidence do you have that you don't do math? You have a business degree. [00:44:00] Your bank account is mostly in the black, you're on the right side of the tax man. What on earth makes you think you cannot do maths? And I have carried that with me all my life, because of one comment that somebody said.

[00:44:16] **Beth Stallwood:** And we all have something like that. And I was talking to someone I was coaching the other day and we, we talked about it as like carrying around, you know, those kids have these trunky things. Animals. It's like carrying a Trunki from when you're a kid and still taking on



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holiday with you when you're a 40 year old who has moved way beyond where you are just like you deserve some kind of really fancy carry on baggage which you're carrying around with you.

And you've got this old battered trunk from when you were a kid and it's still the thing that's driving.

[00:44:50] **Sam Mather:** So many of your behaviours and the narratives that you believe about yourself, are they really true? Yeah. So we need to think about what those narratives are because those narratives that are not useful will undermine our competence.

Our sense of control, our belief in our connectedness, even consistency of our course. So we need to do an audit on our use, on our narratives and get rid of the ones that are not useful.

[00:45:21] **Beth Stallwood:** King of call out and get rid of your own BS. Isn't it?

[00:45:27] **Sam Mather:** Yeah because it all, it does not serve you when it comes, when it comes to being psychologically safe and certainly one of the key well, two of the key resources that my research found around what you need for psychological safety, one of them was optimism. Yeah. And defined as believing that good things will happen. And the other one was hope. Being able to see and [00:46:00] plan constructive goals and way forward. And, useful narratives that just big boulders, on those non-useful narratives, sorry, are big boulders on the, on that journey.

[00:46:11] **Beth Stallwood:** Yeah. I often, I love that optimism and hope. I often talk about work joyous that, it's, it's hopeful. It's not saying I'm definitely going to have all these things that I want because you know, there's life and things that get in the way, but it's that hope that there and that optimism, there is something out there that you can make steps towards. You can make things happen that you have some control over.

[00:46:32] **Sam Mather:** And the final part, the model is discerning. So one of the resources that has been proven to contribute to psychological safety and interestingly resilience, which was a, which is a, has different requirements. But the one that was optimal for psychological safety and resilience was actually attentional control.

There is a lot of, research around, how, attentional control can, help, reduce depression and anxiety and improve mental wellbeing, and so D is for discerning being very discerning what you let into your head. So I don't do a lot of media social media, because if I did. I might think that I, my lips should be much more puffy than they are, and I shouldn't, I shouldn't look the way I do and I should be wearing certain stuff and they are not helpful. So I took a discerning approach as to what I read and what I let in and that has been able to control your attention. Now in the workplace this is about making a choice. So something happens in the workplace the example I use in the book is,



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they've and this is, this is based on, a real story whereby they have moved from allocated parking spaces [00:48:00] to first come first served.

[00:48:03] **Beth Stallwood:** Big, big politics there.

[00:48:07] **Sam Mather:** Real corporate stuff here.

And Now half the people, initially, most people who had had an allocated parking space were a little bit disgruntled initially. That's okay but the ones who were low and cognitive resource for whatever reason, their mind was occupied with other things or their limbic, the limbic system was in control they didn't move beyond the initial disgruntlement because they didn't have any enough resource to, to think it through. They were like, well, this is ridiculous. It's, it's, it's mad and I should be having this. And then the ego army kicked in about status and all of those things. But if you just thought about it and those who thought about it, who all actually, we've got a lot more people working from home now, you know, parking is, as of a premium people are also using alternative methods to get to the work to work place.

So actually, yeah, I can see it probably does make sense. Which one do you choose to let in? Do you choose to let in that? Oh, this is ridiculous. And look what I've lost or do you choose to let in and hold onto, yeah. I can see why I can see why this makes sense. Really. Yeah. And it is a choice. People will say I can't help it. Yes you can, if your brain is fit yes you can.

[00:49:27] **Beth Stallwood:** And that's the thing about which, which version of this story you going for. And everyone's always like, well, what's the version of the truth is that, well, there's always like 10 different versions. Isn't there, there's the version where it's someone else's fault.

There's a version where it's my fault. There's a version where actually it's just a situation and being able to decide. But I do imagine that takes some ability in your brain because you have to be in a space where you can understand and look at your own emotions. Look at your own reaction. Look at the situation, reflect understand before you're just kind of going that instant emotional reaction.

[00:49:59] **Sam Mather:** And the [00:50:00] beauty is with practice this gets easier because what we're doing is whenever we're thoughts are merely just connections of neurons and. Oh, since I've, I've studied neuroscience, a lot of the old belief systems I had about things like, personality profiling and all those sorts of things I now really question because actually your thoughts and who you are just merely a series of connections of neurons and they can be changed. In fact, one of the books I'm reading at the moment, it's about how you do that, how you could, you can not only just change your neurons, but they are also finding you can also change your genes.

Wow. So if we can change at such a fundamental level, if we have such plasticity in our brain, then you can train it and I'm not saying it's easy and this goes back to the basic, if you're, if you're, if



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you're if your brain is not fit. And if you are dealing with a big issue at the moment, such as a bereavement, et cetera, that's not the time to start, start retraining your brain. There will always be life events which will consume the brain and you, consume your thoughts, but on a general day to day basis, when we have equilibrium we can choose, we can change the neuro pathways.

[00:51:31] **Beth Stallwood:** And yeah, the thing is here, isn't it? Is it get the basics right first and then go on that journey. Don't try and do that. If you haven't got your basics in place. Yeah,

[00:51:40] **Sam Mather:** Yeah. Not at all. Nope. And the caveat is also that what I'm talking about here is, Joe average. So if people, this is not about clinical issues, if people have, clinical mental issues that are being treated with drugs, et cetera, that is [00:52:00] a different story.

Okay. That that's it. I'm not saying that this is the stuff that will cure, things like, bipolar or anything like that. That is not, this is for your neuro typical brain.

[00:52:18] **Beth Stallwood:** Yeah, it's so fascinating. And I honestly could talk to you for hours and hours more and I'm going to go and I bought the books. I'm going to go and dive in to reading them. but what we can't do is to continue on for hours and hours for our listeners. So what I would love to do now is to, dive into some quickfire questions. If that's all right with you? I would love to know, first of all, what is always guaranteed to bring you a little bit of work joy.

[00:52:46] **Sam Mather:** Watching people learn and grow. Definitely. I love watching the light bulb moment come on, or being able to explain something where they go, oh yeah, I get that all. That's really helpful that that's my little moment of joy and reward.

[00:53:03] **Beth Stallwood:** And really fits in with your purpose as well. Doesn't it? So that's a lovely connection that love it. Second question. What book are you currently reading?

[00:53:12] **Sam Mather:** Oh, oh, well, as of two days ago, I was reading The Coddling Of The American Mind, which, both infuriated me, and, and shocked me and scared me about it's about resilience of the young minds and how, we are unwittingly making minds young people's minds, less resilient for the world, but I'd just started The Epigenetics Revolution by Nessa Carey which is what I was referring to about how we can mould our genes.

[00:53:45] **Beth Stallwood:** Okay, cool. I'm gonna have to look those ones up. Question three. What's the best or most useful bit of advice that you've had in your life that you always find yourself coming back? [00:54:00]

[00:54:00] **Sam Mather:** Yes. It was from an ex boss of mine. And they said just because you love something or someone doesn't make it good for you. Yeah. Whether that's chocolate or a friend or a partner, I'm loving it as one thing, whether it's good for you as who you are, is a different thing.



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[00:54:27] **Beth Stallwood:** That's a brilliant bit of advice.

[00:54:29] **Sam Mather:** It was, it's been, it has served me very well and I've had to make some tough decisions.

[00:54:33] **Beth Stallwood:** Yeah. But it's a really good cause it's looking at. Just because it's yeah. Oh, amazing. I'm quite I'm. Yeah, I'm taking that one with me what is one super practical bit of advice to our listeners? That's something that they could go and do now do tomorrow do the next day that would help them in feeling psychologically safe.

[00:54:54] **Sam Mather:** Go back to basics, get your right hours. Do a bit of exercise, drink enough water that is in a day and eat your carbs, the good carbs. So start with the basics. Definitely.

[00:55:08] **Beth Stallwood:** Yeah. I build it from where, see there, love it. And also that's things that everyone can do, right. That none of that is complicated.

[00:55:16] **Sam Mather:** Yeah, absolutely. And like I say, it's not, it's not earth shattering rocket science, who look at the big revelation of my research, it's out there.

But what I, I like to think I can do is explain the neuroscience, why we need to sleep and why we need to eat carbs, and why, you know, give you give some sort of science behind it, rather than just your parents pointing a nagging finger at you.

[00:55:40] **Beth Stallwood:** Amazing. And then finally, I'm sure that many people want to know where can people find out more about you and your work?

[00:55:48] **Sam Mather:** So I have a website, www.drsmather.com. There is information there [00:56:00] about me, some of the people I work with the books, and, the, the kind of work that I do and with whom, to help organizations and individuals, improve their performance.

[00:56:13] **Beth Stallwood:** Brilliant. And what we'll do is we'll put the website in the show notes when we pop it out there so that people can link straight through. It's been amazing chatting with you today. Thank you so much for sharing that high level of your research. I am definitely going to go and learn more about it. I think it's a really interesting concept thinking about what can you bring yourself in this world of psychological safety?

So thank you very much for being a guest on the Work Joy Jam.

[00:56:40] **Sam Mather:** It's a pleasure. Thank you very much.



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[00:56:44] **Beth Stallwood:** I really enjoyed that conversation with Dr. Sam Mather, and we could have gone on, I think for another couple of hours, but I wanted to keep the conversation in a space that you as the audience could make the most of it. Some really interesting things came out for me. I think that the simplicity of the models that she was talking around about being safe and sound of really interesting.

Some of those things I think we all, well, I know I did connected to, in that, how we feel and how we react to what happens in our emotions. But also this understanding that some of that is controllable. It's not necessarily something we can get rid of. And in fact, would we really want to safety as in fact, quite important to us and fearless living isn't the answer to everything. But how do we understand and manage some of those things within ourselves? How do we create a narrative such important one I know I have them the actually realistically, where are they? Where are we now getting rid of some of those old messages we used to tell ourselves?

I think it's a great one. And to really use this as a consideration for when we are making change. We're not necessarily talking [00:58:00] about projects here. We're not talking about IT. We're talking about humans and how do we help people to feel safe while that change is happening, help people to, work through these things.

So some really great advice there from Sam and do you check out her two books, we will link to her website so that you can explore a little bit deeper into this world for psychological safety. If you are interested in finding out more about Work Joy and the things that you can do in your life and in your world to create more joy in it, do come and join Club Work Joy we are a really lovely inclusive growing community of people who are working together being inspired by an amazing speakers, having conversations and connecting through networking with people in different organizations and being able to create and cultivate and look at how practically we can really create joy in our working lives. And if he wants to go a little bit deeper and a bit more personal, I do have my Work Joy Way coaching program it's a 16 week program with experiments group coaching and one-to-one with me do chat. It's all out at www.createworkjoy.com. You'll find the links to sign up for Club Work Joy through that, and also to sign up for the Work Joy Way if you're interested in that we have a number of episodes across the Work Joy Jam podcast, do go and have a listen.

Yeah. I hope you have a great day. Thank you.